



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF MUSIC

“African Queens”

Karen Slack, *soprano*—John R. Stratton Visitor in Music
Kevin Miller, *piano*

Thursday, March 20 at 7:30pm | Walter Hall, 80 Queens Park

PROGRAM

*Precatio**

Dave Ragland (b. 1978)

*Behold, The Queen**

Carlos Simon (b.1986)

*The Queen of Sheba**

Dave Ragland

*The Song of Nzingah**

Jessie Nzinga Montgomery (b.1981)

Luwah (Bitter Tears)

Fred Onovwerosuoke (b.1960)

*A Letter From Queen Ufua**

Shawn Okpebholo (b.1981)

Intermission

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years, it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

As part of the Faculty's commitment to improving Indigenous inclusion, we call upon all members of our community to start/continue their personal journeys towards understanding and acknowledging Indigenous peoples' histories, truths and cultures. Visit indigenous.utoronto.ca to learn more.

Duniya (Mystic Universe)

Fred Onovwerosuoke

*I Am Not Your God**

Jasmine Arielle Barnes (b.1991)

A Prayer

Will Liverman (b.1988)

*Queen Nanny's Lullabye**

Joel Thompson (b.1988)

*Amanirenas**

Damien Geter (1980)

**Commissioned for Karen Slack by the Ravinia Music Festival, Aspen Music Festival and School, Boston Symphony Orchestra for the Tanglewood Learning Institute, Denver Friends of Chamber Music, Washington Performing Arts, The 92nd Street Y, New York, and the Newport Classical Music Festival*

Karen Slack is represented by MKI Artists.

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www.mkiartists.com



PROGRAM NOTES / TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

Precatio

Dave Ragland

Text by Jay St. Flono

"Precatio," an evocative art song sung in Latin, guides the listener through a profound spiritual journey within a sacred temple space. Here, the protagonist seeks to affirm her identity as a beautiful daughter of African female rulers of the past. The song's tranquil opening evolves into a powerful, rhythmic dance at its core, reflecting a jubilant celebration of heritage and strength. As the rhythmic intensity subsides, the piece concludes with a demanding imploration for the "Divine Mothers of Water" to enter the temple, invoking a sense of reverence and unity with ancestral spirits. This composition weaves together elements of spirituality, history, and rhythmic vitality.

—Dave Ragland

Text & Translation

Nigra sum, et formosa, filia Jerusalem.

Sicut gloria Bilquis.

Sicut potentia Amina

Sicut sapientia Candacis.

Sicut feminae spirituales Sybilla.

Considerare quod fusca sim, quia coloravit me sol.

Considerare quod fusca sim, quia benedicta me sol.

Aquae Divina Matres,

Nos invocum dos hoc in templum.

I am black and beautiful, a daughter of Jerusalem.

Like the glory of Bilquis.

Like the power of Amina

Like the wisdom of Candace.

Like the spiritual women of Sybil.

Consider that I am brown because the sun has colored me.

Consider that I am brown because the sun has blessed me.

Divine Mothers of Water

We invite you to this temple.

CHANT FOR THE QUEEN OF THE KNIVES

Arise, Aminata, and lead your women to peaceful war
that knows no end until a Hoodoo woman's humanity
becomes the crown of all men

Arise, ganuwar Amina

Huduba to your enemies

Yellow trumpets scream a song

of ever-flowing blood

watering the bitter ground

growing violent legacies tall-like-trees

Veil, Aminata
Watch, Aminata
Whisper, Aminata
We are you, Aminata

Behold, The Queen

Carlos Simon
Text by Jay St. Flono

Text

PRAISE-SONG FOR THE BLACK VENUS IN TIME

II. Scriptura

behold, the queen
in all her negrified glory,

behold, the queen
in all her negrified glory,

sudden alchemies,
twist, bend, make her hands to rule
by blood and by spirit

behold, the queen
in all her cataclysmic wisdom,
sudden humanities,
turn, burn, make her heart to love
till juices run golden

behold, the queen
behold, the queen
in all her jealous adoration,
sudden enemies,
tear, bruise, make her name to die
but the earth remembers
her crown is makumba, behold
her state the unclean world, behold
her throne a rocking chair; behold
her wisdom, behold
all the colors in a song
call on us to behold
behold
the woman who was once a god-loved child,
and let out a soft, sweet-smelling cry, "behold."

The Queen of Sheba

Dave Ragland
Text by Alicia Haymer

"The Queen of Sheba" - enveloped in a mysterious and enchanting aura - draws inspiration from the rich tapestry of Ethiopian musical traditions, utilizing scales and modes that evoke the ancient and mystical. As the Queen of Sheba journeys to meet King Solomon, the song oscillates between ethereal melodies and poignant spoken word, creating a dynamic interplay that underscores her journey of self-discovery and empowerment. The Queen's lyrical testament to her sovereignty and strength is rendered with an authenticity that honors her storied legacy.

—Dave Ragland

Text

On a courageous journey to meet a king so wise
As mystery surrounds me,
People wonder who I really am.
Bilquis, Makeda, Valiant.
Queen of Sheba.

Emerging from the land of Sheba
With all of my power, strength, and might.
To meet with King Solomon the wisest of leaders
With gold and stones as offerings
I marvel at his sight.

As I enter, I witness his power
I wonder how much he can teach me?
The opulence of his kingdom
Astounding!
I begin to riddle him with queries.
What are the secrets of this life?
What are the answers to the vastness above?
Can his wit and knowledge
Withstand that of my own?

A woman who has fought and earned her respect.
No man will make me cower. We soon come to an understanding
A balance of humility and power.
Debating is nothing new for the Queen
For I am aware of the power I hold.
I've triumphed in battle all while being doubted.
An ultimate woman.
Powerfully bold.

I set out on this passage in search of understandings
Assessing a leader and his great command.
I come away assured of my own worthiness
The power to move a nation inside of my hand.

The Song of Nzingah

Jessie Nzinga Montgomery
Text by Jay St. Flono

Program Note

My mother named me Nzinga. Jessie Nzinga Montgomery. She thought I should use my given name, “Jessie” after my great-aunt whom she was very fond of as she thought it would be easier for me to get along in life with a more American name. But she wanted me to be connected to the legacy and power of the African Queen Nzinga. Regretfully, I have treated the name the way a lot of people treat their middle names—as a fun fact, or simply just the “N.” listed on my passport. I knew the name had a lot of power and over the years learned that Nzinga had been a somewhat brutal ruler and I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the meaning. Now, I am grateful for the opportunity in this piece to understand more of Nzinga’s inner conflict as a leader who had to make difficult sacrifices in order to free her Angolan people from Portuguese occupation. Her complexity and struggle is part of our story and proud to honor my namesake through this song.

The words by Jay Saint Flono explore Queen Nzinga’s psychological struggle over having to adopt Christianity over her original Kongolesse religious beliefs and practices. The music twists and bends, in chromatic and swirling underpinnings, with the strain of her inner dialogue as she prays for her own relief.

—Jessie Nzinga Montgomery

The non-English text is sourced from Kimbundu/kiKongo language sources from Christian missionaries in the 19th Century who were translating the Holy Bible into the indigenous languages of present-day Angola. Nzambici is a celestial creator goddess, the female half of Nzambi Mpungu (God Almighty), whose divine bodies stand at the center of all creation on the Congolese Cosmogram, representing the continual flow of existence through cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth. Kalunga, the spiritual fire at the center of the world that gives it its structure, is also the watery line between the world of spirit and humanity, which took on new meaning for descendants of enslaved Africans brought across the Atlantic by the Portuguese, Spanish, English and other European powers during their ongoing political conflicts with many African states and civilizations. The inclusion of this element represents the worldview of spiritual traditionalists, the Banganga (medicine men), who often served in the court of Nzinga as advisors, many of which were sold into slavery by her machinations as she sought to expand Christianity’s influence into her kingdom for political purposes of maintaining social and economic relations with Spain and Portugal. Through this, the poem seeks to explore the possible mindset of someone in her political position, with each stanza representing a different emotional stage of reckoning with the world, beginning with Biblical text written in kiKongo that sings the praises of Nzambici and Nzambi Mpungu and ending, ultimately, in acceptance of what her political career costed her personally and how it impacted the future of Angola and the Atlantic Creole world in centuries to come.

—Jay Saint Flono

Text & Translation

Spoken:

Eme ngala Njinga, Rainha Njinga, Dona Anna de Sousa, Njinga Mbande, Ngola Njinga Born of mysteries, Kujinga, Serene as a Serpent, Nzingah.

Sung:

Sia yimbila kwa Nzambici, yandi olungidi.

Nzambici yandi wune zingolo zame, ye lumbu luami!

Nzambi Mpungu wavanga dizulu ye ntoto,
Nsi ina kavite vanga, yayonsono yakalakunsinlangu.

I have kept my fear a secret
I have seldom known defeat
I have come through tremblin' waters
Drowned, below, my enemies
Yearn to kiss my warring feet

I twist and bend Nzambi's knife
In the vellum-skin of history
Make jealousy leak from Europa's fascinated eye
As her children burst their lips to taste me

At the old Kalunga cross where I first saw the light
And the terror of the Christ fell away
There the priests were sold
'Cross the salt-bleeding sea
And now I am blessed to sing His praise!
I have kept my faith a secret
I have come to sing defeat
I depart through tremblin' waters
O Kalunga, carry me

TRANSLATION/MEANING of text in spoken section:

I am Njinga, Queen Njinga

Kujinga - to twist (referencing how the umbilical cord was wrapped around Njinga's neck at birth) and drawing parallels between that immensity of birth and the wisdom of serpents in Kongo religion and their connection to zumbi (ancestors) and ilundu (deities), which counteracts Christian ideas about the innate 'evilness' of serpents.

TRANSLATION of Congo text:

I will sing of Goddess, (s)he conquered.
Goddess (s)he is my strength and my song.

God Almighty created Heaven and Earth,
The earth first made, all was underwater.

Luwah (Bitter Tears)

Fred Onovwerosuoke

Text based on Mokpe-Bakweri (Cameroon)
traditional folktale collected by Lyombe Eko

Program Note

Luwah is from Cameroon, It's a dirge. Everyone has a lingering memory of losing a loved one.

—Fred Onovwerosuoke

Text & Translation

Lu wahe'e	Hear my lament
Wu la aszre na zhi	I've never cried
whiye lu we	Like this before
Lu wah'e	Hear my lament
E kweli yenga na	This great loss
Na lute ya	Saddens me
Nanga na ka ma	And startles me

A Letter From Queen Ufua

Shawn Okpebholo

Text by Tsitsi Ella Jaji

Program Note

Queen Ufua's Letter is an art song for soprano and piano composed for soprano Karen Slack and Kevin Miller, as part of Slack's African Queen's project. Poet Tsitsi Ella Jaji crafted the evocative text for the work, which takes the form of a letter written to my daughters, Eva and Corinne, from their great-great-great-grandmother, Queen Ufua of Esanland. Esan, my ancestral ethnic group, is generationally rooted in the central region of Edo State in Nigeria. The Esan language is intrinsically poetic. Everyday speech is permeated with metaphors, and Jaji's text draws inspiration from four specific Esan proverbs:

Ose ba ni emiamhen (Beauty is more painful than infirmity.)

Ese ii muin ede (No amount of trouble can prevent daybreak.)

Ono ii mhon omhon ii mhon oruan (The one who has no child cannot have an in-law.)

Aah ii ghen omhon bhi isira oje (Don't sing praise of a child in his presence.)

Jaji subtly and with grace interweaves my family's lineage to further amplify the tender and empowering message to my daughters. Ufua, the queen and the embodiment of "light" in the Esan language, was married to King Akhilomen, a name laden with "great responsibility." My ancestral journey continues to unfold through their son Okhulun, whose name echoes the vastness of the "sky," to his daughter, my grandmother, Ejaina, whose name aptly translates to "wherever I go is good." Then comes my father, Fidelis, the first to bear a non-Esan name, meaning "faithful," carrying our line forward to myself, granting me the Esan name, Ehireime, "gift from God." And finally, we have my precious daughters: Eva—"life"—and Corinne, whose name encapsulates both "a beautiful maiden" and "spear."

This letter, centered on life (Eva), beauty (Corinne), and light (Ufua), serves as a gift to my daughters: my desire to embolden them to cherish our rich ancestry, to never allow anyone to diminish their confidence and strength, to embrace resilience and grow in the face of adversity, to foster humility and discern true value, and to never forget the many mothers who have, and will, mold them into strong and flourishing women.

While this work is sweetly personal—dedicated to my daughters—it is my fervent hope that the affecting words of Jaji, brought to life through embodied performances by Karen Slack and Kevin Miller, as well as limitless other artists, will resonate with and deeply inspire many, as an expression of life, beauty, and inner light.

–Shawn Okpebholo

Text

O daughters of my granddaughter's
grandson, I am Queen Ufua,
Light wed to Responsibility,
Hear my blessing:

Love the ones who look up
And see you in the stars.
Anywhere you go is good
If you make it so.

My darlings, beauty burns,
Yet tears will not blind you.
If hunters chase your feathers
Make your beak like a spear.

*I leave you your light
I leave you your beauty
I give you your life, as
Mothers always have.*

She wears bright gold jewelry,
she knows she does not need it.
Only God gives firewood
when there is no axe.

My darlings, no amount of trouble,
Has ever killed the sun.
Nothing can stop a River flowing
So grow, grow like the reeds.

*I see your light
I see your beauty
I see your life,
hope in deadly times.*

Mother-love does not
Begin in the Womb
The Child on my back
Gives birth to delight.

My darlings, they said we should not sing
Our children's praises to them
But I am Queen Ufua and
I call you all my light.

This is all I wanted you to know
when I asked your father
to give you this note,

*You are beauty
Your are life and
We are light*

Love,
Queen Ufua,
Your daddy's nana's nana

Duniya (Mystic Universe)

Fred Onovwerosuoke

Text based on Mandinka/Bambara (Gambia/Mali) poem co-edited with Sankung Susso

Program Note

Duniya taps from griot vocal traditions from the Mali/SeneGambia sub-region of West Africa, and draws accompaniment ideas from the four-string kontigo and the robust low drones of the also multi-stringed kamelangoni. The song draws from ancient Mandinka poetry about the unsurpassed wisdom of an Almighty, Supreme God, who must be the true and only architect of the universe.

—Fred Onovwerosuoke

Text & Translation

Alisalam aleka	Peace be upon you
Fa, duniy'Allah	Behold, God's universe
Allah sum i'llahi	Of God, the Merciful
Fa, duniya, lon man di	God's universe is beyond
Allah sum ilahi	Understanding, Merciful God
Allah, akubar!	Great God
E, Kuba jama le	Grand designs, perpetual,
Tambita walasum	And forever

I Am Not Your God

Jasmine Arielle Barnes

Text by Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton

Queen Nandi, Mother of Shaka; Zulu Tribe

Program Note

"I AM NOT YOUR GOD!" Is a song written for Soprano and Piano that gives Queen Nandi of Zulu dialogue to speak to her son beyond the grave. Nandi Bhebe, became pregnant with Shaka by the leader of the Zulu tribe out of wedlock and was treated so poorly that she left without Shaka. Treatment got bad for Shaka and so his uncle had to smuggle him out of Zulu to get him to Nandi. Most tribes Nandi went to after also treated her poorly, and Shaka witnessing it all, carried rage towards those tribes. Shaka trained as a warrior, and became chief of their tribe. Upon notice of his Father passing, he conquered Zulu by military force and claimed the throne. Shaka Zulu, known for his war tactics and vast military force, appointed Nandi Bhebe, his mother, as Queen and his advisor. This kind of power was unknown to women at the time, and with it, she established Female military, war plans, and often used her position to inflict

revenge upon the many tribes who wronged her while Shaka was young. Shaka loved his mother so much to the point of worship, and he valued her ideas, wisdom, and existence. When Nandi passed, Shaka was so wrought with grief, that it turned to rage. Shaka enforced grief among the Zulu tribe for a year following Queen Nandi's death by means of human sacrifice, animal sacrifice and induced famine.

"I AM NOT YOUR GOD!" explores a dialogue that Queen Nandi might have with Shaka, to stop the senseless violence, and to stop forcing people to worship her beyond the grave. This is a slant commentary on Black Women being often placed in the "savior" position, reclaiming humanness. Musically, this piece travels many styles of music including Jazz , South African music, abstract music etc. Much of it is meant to carry the strength of Nandi in its sound and ethereal music to convey a voice beyond the grave.

Text

I am not your God!
I am Nandi. Queen Nandi.

Threat by Threat I build a new home.
Don't call me blessed.
Curse by curse by my own tribe
Left on my own

I knew I held Zulu future in my womb
I knew you were a fighter.
Felt you kick and spear your own war
But Son...

I am your Mother.
I can't bend the sands of time
I am Nandi, just trying not to fall
You named me Queen
like the world sees me divine
I am your Mother. I am not your God.
I am not your God!

Throne by throne you took by force
Your Father's throne, once again ,
Our Zulu home.
War by war we took revenge.
Those who opposed, oppose no more.

Thousands of soldiers and female regimes.
Knew you were a leader, and I, your Queen.
I know you will make Zulu rise.
You rule with power through my advise.
But Shaka...

I am your Mother.
I can't bend the sands of time
I am Nandi, just trying not to fall
You named me Queen

like the world sees me divine
I am your Mother. I am not your God.
I am not...

Forever. I don't know how to be forever.
No reason for Zulu to suffer.
Cease all bloodshed.
Let the earth yield its harvest.
No sacrifice will bring me back to life.

I am your Mother.
I can't bend the sands of time
I am Nandi, just trying not to fall
You named me Queen
like the world sees me divine
I am your Mother. I am not your God.
I am not your God!

SHE IS OF GOD

She is
She is of God

She is
She is the eyes that Loved God
And shined as the Love returned
To the source of her humanity
Where the heart truly lives

She is
She is the eyes that Saw God
When fear came
And as a night-hiding thief tried to steal freedom
From her trembling fingers
Stained with the honeyed colors of happiness

Oh but she
She is
She is the hand that Held God
Because in the sweet sway of time
Before woman was even made
It was there that God held Her

Text & Translation

Text by Mary Ground

Jamaican Patois

Come here, likkle one

Standard American English

Come here, little one.

Come an ress your head
"It won't be long now,"
So di baaba said.

You look a likkle lost, baby
But you will find your way.
No worry if yu yeye dem a droop so,
Jus lissin what you Nanny seh:

Come here likkle one
Come an ress your head
"It won't be long now,"
So di baaba said.

So, tarry a while pon di big rock stone
if you legdem a cramp an strain.
Mi know yu chess a go toogatoomtoom
but you Nanny soon tek weh di pain.

Come here likkle one
Come an ress your head
"It won't be long now,"
So di baaba said.

Here you are
Time to sleep now,
Close those wide and fearful eyes.
As yu troat close up
and yu lips grow numb,
I'll wipe away the blood and you'll realize:
The end is drawing nigh, enslaver.
You stole my sister from my arms, colonizer,
And stole the land from my people, abuser,
And beat my brother black and red, fertilizer,
And you will reap what you've sown, likkle one.

Good night, likkle one.
It won't be long now...

WATCHING

Great Woman of the Black Land
Watching Amanirenas
Amon's Child
Conquering, searing gold in a holy hand
Knowing Amanirenas
Mother of a Million Suns
Shining in the shadowed gaze of a Red Wolf
Who bites the heel of a Lioness
Yet cannot taste her blood

*Come and rest your head.
"It won't be long now,"
So the barber said.*

*You look a little lost, baby,
But you will find your way.
Don't worry if your eyes are drooping.
Just listen to what your Nanny says:*

*So, rest a while on that boulder
if your legs are cramped and strained.
I know your heart is palpitating
but your Nanny will soon take away the pain.*

*As your throat closes up,
And your lips grow numb,*

Great Woman of the Valley
One-eyed Amanirenas
Amon's Child
Sleeping, weeping salt in a misty mirror
Glistening Amanirenas
Victor of a Hundred Bloods
Wading in the earthen glaze of Nahal's water
Who drowns the angbreast of Amon's child,
Yet cannot take her heart

Amanirenas

Damien Geter

Text by Lorene Cary

Program Note

When Karen approached the Blacknificent 7 to be a part of the African Queens project, I knew immediately that my subject would be the great ruler, Amanirenas, the "One Eyed African Queen," ruler of the kingdom of Kush. Little is known about her life, but perhaps what she is most well known for was defeating Caesar in his failed attempt to conquer Kush.

The music's contrasting phrases highlight two sides of Amanirenas; the fierce warrior, and the gentle mother which is symbolic of the everyday queens I have known throughout my life.

—Damien Geter

Text

No, Daughter! No!
Do not take up my sword.
Do not strap on my shield.

Patience...

Rome marched into Kush,
Bringing death:
To your father,
Your brother,
Our soldiers,
Our women,
Our children,
Our cattle and grain.

And I cut off the head
Of their statue,

Caesar's head,
And buried it
Under the door
To my temple.

Go step on it
When you pray.

But do not take up
My sword.

Patience...

This is not Egypt
And I am not Cleopatra.
I am Amanirenas.
I will not hold
Death to my breast
And give my people
Over to Rome.

No!

We steal into their stinking camps.
Night after night
And as they
Dream of our blood,
We slit their throats -
And choke on their own.

Patience -

I have sent
Golden arrows to
Caesar and said:
*"If you want peace, take these with my blessing;
If you want war, you will need them."*

Rome has scooped out my eye.
But the eye that is left
Can see the future:
We will live!
Queen-mother and queen,
Qora and kandake,
Ruling Kush,
Free of Rome!!

And your daughter
And hers
And hers,

And hers!

Do not take up my sword.
Do not strap on my shield.

Patience!

I will give you a crown!

*Pronunciation Note: Qore (KOOR-ray) and
Kandake (KUN-duh-kay)
Amanirenas, Kush's Great Woman/Queen/
Kandake, recovers from wounds from her in a
night raid, and speaks to her daughter, who is
preparing to follow her dead father and brother
and wounded mother into battle against the
Romans.*

And stole the land from my people, abuser,
And beat my brother black and red, fertilizer,
And you will reap what you've sown, likkle one.

Good night, likkle one.
It won't be long now...

WATCHING

Great Woman of the Black Land
Watching Amanirenas
Amon's Child
Conquering, searing gold in a holy hand
Knowing Amanirenas
Mother of a Million Suns
Shining in the shadowed gaze of a Red Wolf
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—Damien Geter

Text

No, Daughter! No!
Do not take up my sword.
Do not strap on my shield.

Patience...

Rome marched into Kush,
Bringing death:
To your father,
Your brother,
Our soldiers,
Our women,
Our children,
Our cattle and grain.

And I cut off the head
Of their statue,
Caesar’s head,
And buried it
Under the door
To my temple.

Go step on it
When you pray.

But do not take up
My sword.

Patience...

This is not Egypt
And I am not Cleopatra.
I am Amanirenas.
I will not hold
Death to my breast
And give my people
Over to Rome.

No!

We steal into their stinking camps.
Night after night
And as they
Dream of our blood,
We slit their throats -
And choke on their own.

Patience -

I have sent
Golden arrows to
Caesar and said:
*"If you want peace, take these with my blessing;
If you want war, you will need them."*

Rome has scooped out my eye.
But the eye that is left
Can see the future:
We will live!
Queen-mother and queen,
Qora and kandake,
Ruling Kush,
Free of Rome!!

And your daughter
And hers
And hers,
And hers!

Do not take up my sword.
Do not strap on my shield.

Patience!

I will give you a crown!

*Pronunciation Note: Qore (KOOR-ray) and Kandake (KUN-duh-kay)
Amanirenas, Kush's Great Woman/Queen/ Kandake, recovers from wounds from her in a night
raid, and speaks to her daughter, who is preparing to follow her dead father and brother and
wounded mother into battle against the Romans.*

BIOGRAPHIES

Karen Slack

Known for performances that "ripped the audience's hearts out" (*Opera News*), Karen Slack is "not only one of the nation's most celebrated sopranos, but a leading voice in changing and making spaces in classical music" (*Trilloquy*). A recipient of the 2022 Sphinx Medal of

Excellence, Slack is an Artistic Advisor for Portland Opera, serves on the board of the American Composers Orchestra and Astral Artists, and holds a faculty position at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

Highlights of Slack's 2023-2024 season include her solo debut with the New York Philharmonic at David Geffen Hall, and her debut as a guest artist with Chamber Music Detroit, where she will give masterclasses and perform two programs: her acclaimed solo recital *Of Thee I Sing* and a program alongside the Pacifica Quartet. She performs in two productions of Shawn Okpebholo's *Songs in Flight*, returns to the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, returns to Colombia for the Festival Internacional de Música Sacra Bogotá, and continues her collaboration with the Pacifica Quartet at the Denver Friends of Chamber Music.

Slack embarks upon an ambitious new recording project in collaboration with ONEComposer and pianist Michelle Cann, to be released later this season on Azica Records, and debuts her new commissioning project *African Queens*, an evening-length vocal recital of new art songs by acclaimed composers Jasmine Barnes, Damien Geter, Jessie Montgomery, Shawn Okpebholo, Dave Ragland, Carlos Simon, and Joel Thompson.

Slack has amassed a body of work reflecting her dedication to premiering works by living composers, with particular focus on using her platform to elevate works by Black artists. In recent seasons, she premiered *Songs in Flight* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, appeared in two separate world premieres by Hannibal Lokumbe with the Nashville Symphony and Oklahoma City Philharmonic; debuted Jasmine Barnes' *Songs of Paul* with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra at Carnegie Hall; premiered Damien Geter's *Justice Symphony* with the Fresno Symphony and The Washington Chorus; and made her Houston Grand Opera debut in the premiere of Joel Thompson and Andrea Davis Pinkney's *A Snowy Day*.

When the pandemic limited live performances, Slack was featured in digital performances with Houston Grand Opera, Madison Opera, and Minnesota Opera; starred in a new production of *Driving While Black*, presented by UrbanArias; and launched a digital talk show, #kikikonversations. She co-created and performed in *#saytheirnames – Women of the Movement*, a film recital and production in partnership with Philadelphia's Lyric Fest, performed in recital for Opera Philadelphia. Appearing alongside actor/narrator Liev Schreiber, she was the featured vocalist in Orpheus Chamber Orchestra's *Speaking Truth to Power*, hosted on Idagio.

She has performed on the stages of the Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Washington National Opera, Scottish Opera, San Francisco Opera, Dallas Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Austin Opera, New Orleans Opera, Minnesota Opera, Vancouver Opera, Edmonton Opera, Sacramento Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Madison Opera, and Arizona Opera, among others. She has appeared with the Melbourne Symphony, Sydney Symphony, Bergen Philharmonic Orchestras, and St. Petersburg Philharmonic. Slack made her Carnegie Hall debut with the Orchestra of St. Luke's and performed as a soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra in the world premiere of Hannibal Lokumbe's *Healing Tones* with conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

A native Philadelphian, Slack is a graduate of the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music, as well as the Adler Fellowship and the Merola Opera Program at the San Francisco Opera.

For more information, please visit www.sopranokarenslack.com

Kevin Miller

American pianist and collaborator Kevin J. Miller is acclaimed for his dynamically artful performances. Recent collaborations include recitals with international tenor Lawrence Brownlee at Carnegie Hall and Houston Grand Opera, countertenor John Holiday at the Kennedy Center and The Barbican in London, Joseph Calleja and Nadine Sierra at the Supreme Court of the United States, as well as an appearance with Mr. Calleja on NPR's Tiny Desk Concert series. Mr. Miller prepared soprano Jessye Norman for performances of Laura Karpman's production of *Ask Your Mama*, which was performed at Carnegie Hall. He also collaborated with the acclaimed countertenor, David Daniels, in a recital at the Glimmerglass Festival. He can be heard on piano on the recording *Been in da Storm So Long*, which features baritone Kenneth Overton.

This New York native has been on the fast track to success since his days as a student at the Boys Choir of Harlem. Beginning his musical studies at the age of 8, Mr. Miller was a featured soprano soloist - most notably in Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Lake George Opera Association's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While a student at the Boys Choir of Harlem, he studied piano with the late conductor and pianist Warren Wilson. It was also during these years that Mr. Miller began his work as an accompanist, having accompanied the choir on its tours of Europe, Israel, Austria, and Japan.

Mr. Miller studied at the Mannes College of Music, where he received a Bachelor of Music degree in Piano. He continued his studies at the University of Michigan School of Music where he received both a Master of Music degree and the Artist Diploma in Collaborative Piano under the tutelage of Martin Katz.

In addition to his formal studies, Mr. Miller has been a participant in some of the country's most prestigious festivals and young artist apprenticeships that include The Tanglewood Institute of Music, Aspen Summer Music Festival, The Cleveland Art Song Festival, San Francisco Opera's Merola Opera Program, Washington National Opera's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program and the Glimmerglass Festival. Upon completion of his apprenticeship at the Glimmerglass Festival, he was invited to serve as a vocal coach at the Glimmerglass Festival.

Dave Ragland

Dave Ragland is a four-time Emmy-nominated composer, conductor, vocalist, and educator based in Nashville, TN. Most recently, Ragland was named the First Place Winner of The Atlanta Opera's 96-Hour Opera Composition Competition. He also received the 2022 Adams-Owens Composition Award by the African-American Art Song Alliance. Ragland has received the 2021 American Prize in Composition, two Telly Awards, and two Midsouth Regional EMMY nominations for his work as composer and audio engineer of Nashville Opera's *One Vote Won*. Ragland is currently collaborating with Damon Davis, Ted Hearne, Alarm Will Sound, and Inversion Vocal Ensemble on Davis' concept opera *Ligeia Mare*.

Ragland collaborated with librettist Mary McCallum to create the children's opera *Charlie and the Wolf* for the Cedar Rapids Opera, and the educational opera *Beatrice* for Oregon's Portland Opera. Additional composition credits include LA Opera, Washington National Opera, Nashville Symphony Orchestra, Nashville Ballet, Memphis Symphony Orchestra, Intersection Contemporary Ensemble, chatterbird, and the Alias Chamber Ensemble. Ragland was the 2020 Grady-Rayam Negro Spirituals Foundation composer-in-residence and a member of the inaugural cohort of composers for the National Teachers of Singing (NATS) Mentoring Program. Ragland is a proud member of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

Carlos Simon

Carlos Simon is a multi-faceted and highly sought-after GRAMMY-nominated composer and curator. The current Composer-in-Residence for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Simon's work spans genres, taking great inspiration from liturgical texts, prose, poetry, and art.

The 2023/24 season sees premiere performances with San Diego Symphony Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, The Washington Chorus, and LA Master Chorale, following recent other commissions from the likes of Minnesota Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Washington National Opera, and New York Philharmonic.

In September 2023, Simon released two albums on Decca. *Together* is a compilation of solo and chamber compositions and arrangements featuring Simon and guests such as J'Nai Bridges, Randall Goosby, Seth Parker Woods and Will Liverman. *brea(d)th* is a landmark work commissioned by Minnesota Orchestra and written in collaboration with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, which was written following George Floyd's murder as a direct response to America's unfulfilled promises and history of systemic oppression against Black Americans. His 2022 album, *Requiem for the Enslaved*, was nominated for a 2023 GRAMMY Award.

"If Simon has inherited anything from his lineage, it appears to be a desire to build bridges between worlds, and use music to illuminate them." -Washington Post

Jessie Nzinga Montgomery

Jessie Montgomery, Musical America's 2023 Composer of the Year, is a GRAMMY-nominated, acclaimed composer, violinist, and educator whose works are performed around the world by leading musicians and ensembles. Described as "turbulent, wildly colorful and exploding with life" (The Washington Post), her music interweaves classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, poetry, and social consciousness, making her an acute interpreter of twenty-first century American sound and experience. In July 2021, she began a three-year appointment as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Mead Composer-in-Residence.

Highlights of her 2022-2023 season include the world premieres of orchestral works for violinist Joshua Bell; the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; a consortium led by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra for New Music USA Amplifying Voices; a violin duo for CSO MusicNOW and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center; and new settings of various works by choreographer Donald Byrd for Nashville Ballet.

Montgomery has been recognized with many prestigious awards and fellowships, including the Civitella Ranieri Fellowship, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence, and the Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation. She is currently visiting faculty at the Vanderbilt University Blair School of Music, Bard College, and The New School, and has been affiliated with the Sphinx Organization since 1999. Montgomery holds degrees from the Juilliard School and New York University and is currently a doctoral candidate in music composition at Princeton University.

For more information visit www.jessiemontgomery.com

Shawn Okpebholo

Storytelling is at the core of composer Shawn E. Okpebholo's music, be it chamber, symphonic, or operatic works. A Grammy nominee, Okpebholo's compositions are regularly performed around the globe to widespread acclaim from both critics and audiences alike. The Washington Post has described his compositions as 'fresh and new and fearless,' as well as 'devastatingly beautiful,' while The Guardian has praised his music as 'lyrical, complex, and singular.'

Okpebholo's artistry has earned him numerous accolades, including awards from The Academy of Arts and Letters, American Prize in Composition, Chamber Music America, and the Barlow Endowment for the Arts. Collaborations with today's leading artists and ensembles, including

Rhiannon Giddens, Lawrence Brownlee, J'Nai Bridges, Will Liverman, eighth blackbird, Copland House Ensemble, and the Chicago, Cincinnati, and Houston Symphony Orchestras, have led to performances in prestigious venues such as Carnegie and Wigmore Halls, the Lincoln, Kennedy, and Kimmel Centers, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as prominent music festivals, including Aspen, Ojai, Bowdoin, and the Oxford International Song Festival. Recently, Okpebholo completed a residency with the Chicago Opera Theater. Currently, he is Jonathan Blanchard Distinguished Professor of Composition at Wheaton College-Conservatory of Music and also serves as the Saykaly Garbulinska Composer-in-Residence with the Lexington Philharmonic. To experience more of Okpebholo's story, please visit shawnokpebholo.com.

Jasmine Arielle Barnes

Emmy award winning composer, Jasmine Arielle Barnes, is a Baltimore native, Dallas based composer. Her music has been described as "refreshing...,engaging...,exciting" by San Francisco Classical Voice, "Beautifully lyrical" by The Telegraph (UK), and "the best possible blend of Billie Holiday and Claude Debussy" by Boston Globe. Barnes is managed by UIA talent, a resident artist for Opera Theater of Saint Louis (2023/24), American Lyric Theater (2021-23), Chautauqua Opera (2021), and All Classical Portland (2021). She has been commissioned by numerous organizations such as NY Philharmonic and Juilliard Pre College, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Opera Theater of Saint Louis, The Washington National Opera and The Kennedy Center, Aspen Music Festival and School, Apollo Chamber Players, Baltimore Choral Arts, CityMusic Cleveland, LyricFest Philadelphia, among others.

A steady rising composer, Barnes has written music for Lawrence Brownlee on album titled "Rising" and since, her art song "Peace" has been named a BMI favorite. Among other artists, she's written for Will Liverman, Russell Thomas, Karen Slack, Leah Hawkins, and a host of other world class artists. A PBS documentary about her choral/orchestral song cycle titled "Portraits: Douglass and Tubman", career, and relationship with Baltimore Choral Arts titled "Dreamer" earned her an Emmy in the 2023 Capital Emmy Awards. Barnes has had a busy year with premieres at Carnegie Hall, LA opera, and Chicago Symphony among others within 2023, yet she still awaits premieres with Opera Theater St. Louis of her opera "On My Mind", NY Philharmonic partnered with Juilliard, and American Composers Forum, an orchestral workshop of her opera "She Who Dared", and many other premieres in 2024.

Joel Thompson

Joel Thompson is an Atlanta-based composer, conductor, pianist, and educator, best known for the choral work, Seven Last Words of the Unarmed, which was premiered in November 2015 by the University of Michigan Men's Glee Club and Dr. Eugene Rogers and won the 2018 American Prize for Choral Composition. In August 2021 he premiered another new work in Boulder at the Colorado Music Festival; the piece sets the writings of James Baldwin to music.

Thompson's works have been performed by esteemed ensembles such as the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Master Chorale, Los Angeles Master Chorale, EXIGENCE, and the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus. Currently a doctoral student at the Yale School of Music, Thompson was also a 2017 post-graduate fellow in Arizona State University's Ensemble Lab/Projecting All Voices Initiative and a composition fellow at the 2017 Aspen Music Festival and School, where he studied with composers Stephen Hartke and Christopher Theofanidis and won the 2017 Hermitage Prize.

Thompson taught at Holy Innocents' Episcopal School in Atlanta from 2015 to 2017, and also served as Director of Choral Studies and Assistant Professor of Music at Andrew College from

2013 to 2015. Thompson has a B.A. in Music and an M.M. in Choral Conducting, both from Emory University.

Damien Geter

Damien Geter is an acclaimed composer who infuses classical music with styles from the Black diaspora to create music that furthers the cause for social justice. His growing body of work includes chamber, vocal, orchestral, and full operatic works, with his compositions being praised for their “skillful vocal writing” (Wall Street Journal). He is Richmond Symphony’s Composer-in-Residence, Portland Opera’s Interim Music Director and Artistic Advisor, and Resonance Ensemble’s Artistic Advisor.

This season, Des Moines Metro Opera presents the full-length world premiere of American Apollo; Virginia Opera holds a workshop of Loving v. Virginia, co-commissioned by Virginia Opera and Richmond Symphony; Chicago Symphony Orchestra programs Annunciation; Richmond Symphony premieres a brand new work; and The Recording Inclusivity Initiative records String Quartet No. 1 “Neo-Soul”.

Last season, COTTON had its Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. premieres; Emmanuel Music performed his motet; Geter conducted his own piece, An African American Requiem (Fort Worth Opera); and led ABSENCE: Terence Blanchard (Portland Opera). In 2022 alone, he had six premieres: An African American Requiem (in partnership with Resonance Ensemble and Oregon Symphony); I Said What I Said for Imani Winds (Anima Mundi Productions, Chamber Music Northwest, and The Oregon Bach Festival co-commission); Holy Ground (Glimmerglass Opera); Elegy (American Guild of Organists); The Bronze Legacy (Chicago Symphony Orchestra); and American Apollo (chamber version for Des Moines Metro Opera). Geter is an alumnus of Austrian American Mozart Festival and Aspen Opera Center, was an Irma Cooper Vocal Competition finalist, and toured with American Spiritual Ensemble. He owns DG Music, Sans Fear Publishing. www.damiengetermusic.com.